

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Master–Disciple Relationship: A Comparative Study between Tibetan Buddhism and Islamic Sufism

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INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial, the master–disciple relationship has been a carrier of tradition for many religions. Although knowledge itself is pivotal for religious belief, the bond between master and disciple is an essential tradition that serves to preserve and transmit knowledge from one generation to another. The majority of the world’s leading religions signify the importance of the teacher–student relationship in their religious texts, be it monotheistic or polytheistic faiths. Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism widely recognize this relationship and debate the issue in depth. In both traditions, the teacher is likened to a foundation for students in the study of religion.¹ In some traditions, the teacher is not

1 Stuart Mcleod, “The Benefits and Pitfalls of the Teacher-Mediator Relationship.” *Contemporary Buddhism* 6, no. 1 (2005): 65–78, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248938797>.

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only the mediator between God and the student² but the ultimate God himself. The only door for disciples to achieve complete blessings and inspiration is the proper cultivation of guru devotion. However, in Islam, the idea of a student's relationship with his master has been conceptualized very differently. Muslims view knowledge as a light that can guide them from the darkness of ignorance. The master–disciple relationship is not merely for the transmission of knowledge but also the bridge that helps develop the moral, spiritual, and intellectual aspects of students.³ Many classical scholars of religion have approached this issue from different perspectives, while Imām Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE), a prominent scholar and leading theologian of Sunni Islam, viewed the practice of learning and teaching as the highest form of worship. In addition to al-Ghazālī, other scholars have also contributed many standard pieces of literature in this genre such as *Tadhkirat al-Sāmi' wa'l-Mutakallim* by Ibn Jamā'ah (d. 1333 CE) and *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim Ṭarīq al-Ta'allum* by Burhān al-Islām al-Zarnūjī (d. 1223 CE).

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term *relationship* as “the way in which two or more people or things are connected, or the state of being connected.” Nevertheless, the link between master and disciple is far more intense than this definition suggests. In addition, the scope and intensity of this relationship vary from one religion to another. In Mahayana Buddhism, the concept of guru is inseparable from the god Buddha.⁴ No one can attain *Buddhahood* completely without having a spiritual friend or guru. It is mentioned in the classical texts of Buddhism that every person possesses inherent *Buddhahood* that is suppressed by desires.⁵ Only by following a spiritual teacher or guru can one reach complete wisdom. It is also important to note that being a disciple of a spiritual teacher is not that simple in Buddhism. One should find a teacher who is appropriate for the spiritual level of the students. There are four categories of teachers in Buddhism, whose levels vary according to their personal attachment to the Lord Buddha.⁶ This paper will also examine some details of the master–disciple relationship in Buddhism.

In contrast, Muslim literature begins the discussion about the master–disciple relationship by starting with the value of knowledge in the light of the Qur'ān and Sunna. It sees knowledge as the lost property of the believer and emphasizes the importance of retrieving it wherever he finds it. Islam teaches certain etiquettes and conditions which one should practice in the process of gaining knowledge. According to the traditional view, true knowledge can only be attained through complete obedience and good conduct towards the teacher.

2 Ross E. Klinger, “The Tibetan Guru Refuge: A Historical Perspective.” *The Tibet Journal* 5, no. 4 (1980): 9–19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43299994>.

3 Muhammad Zulqarnain. “An Investigation of Teacher–Student Relationship in Islamic History of Education.” *TARBIYA: Journal of Education in Muslim Society* 4, no. 1 (2017): 13–21, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15408/tjems.v4i1.5317>.

4 Kongtrul. Trans. *The Teacher–Student Relationship*, 27.

5 Arya Maitreya and Acaya Asanga, *The Changeless Nature*, trans. Ken and Katia Holmes (Scotland: Karma Kagyu Trust, 1985), 78.

6 Jamgon Kongtrul, *The Teacher–Student Relationship*, trans. Ron Garry (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1999), 38.

This paper is divided into two main parts, which discusses the concept of the master–disciple relationship from the perspective of Buddhism and Islam. Given the vastness of the subject area, this paper selectively focuses on Tibetan Buddhism and the Sufi tradition of Islam. It illustrates the crucial role of masters in both religions. Moreover, it discusses etiquettes, duties, and responsibilities in the paths of teaching and learning, both in Islam and Buddhism. The research adopts the textual analysis method, drawing on the materials written by specialists in each religion. Finally, through a comparative analysis, similarities and diverging features of the master–disciple relationship in both religions are also explored. This study seeks to set forth certain possibilities of research in this field that can fill the gap in the existing literature.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism, Sufism, Teacher qualities, Student etiquette, Knowledge transfer

THE TEACHER FROM A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

Regardless of different schools of Buddhism, it places great emphasis on the relationship between master and disciple and maintains that anyone who wants to achieve true spiritual accomplishment should be accompanied by a well-qualified teacher and should contemplate his teachings.⁷ The religious teachings and blessings in Buddhism are passed down through an uninterrupted lineage that gives prominence to the link between teacher and student. Since the Buddhist tradition was originally a by-product of Asian mysticism,⁸ the key factor that plays a vital role in this issue is the Sanskrit word “guru.” The word *guru* is a popular term in Buddhism and Hinduism, which designates “the religious teacher.”⁹ Literally, *gu* is short for *guna*, which means good qualities, and *ru* is short for *ruchi*, which means a collection. In relation to this Sanskrit word, Buddhists also use *lama*, a Tibetan word that refers to the religious teacher. The word *lama* is a combination of two words: *la* means one who has great character through the knowledge of *sutras* and *tantras*, and *ma* means one who has motherly love for all creatures.¹⁰ Thus, both *guru* and *lama* maintain that the religious master should have good behavior and be well educated in wisdom and knowledge that can inspire others. He should be an accessible person whom everyone can benefit from. The ancient Buddhist polymath Asvaghosa describes three primary potentials of a *guru* which he must follow in his life. He states that the *guru* should be “pure, learned, and wishing to benefit others.” Here, purity means the pureness of heart that should be the result of an exemplary form of morality.¹¹ A *lama* should have

7 Thubten Chodrak Yuthok, “The Excellent Method of Cultivating Guru Devotion.” *The Tibet Journal* 7, no. 3 (1982): 35–45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43302174>.

8 Roger R. Jackson, “How Mystical is Buddhism.” *Asian Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (1996): 147–153, <http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-ADM/jackson.htm>.

9 Alexander Berzin, *Wise Teacher, Wise Student Tibetan Approaches to a Healthy Relationship* (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2010) 13.

10 Yuthok, “The Excellent Method of Cultivating Guru Devotion,” 35.

11 *Ibid.*

solid insight into all aspects of knowledge transmission such as mastery in a subject matter and an effective method of teaching. He should also have the knowledge of *sutras* and *shastras* that are attained by personal realization through the practice of meditation. Morality is an indispensable quality of a religious master, which he can achieve by following the laws of *Vinaya*.¹²

The teachers also vary according to four classifications, considering their personal relationship to the Lord Buddha. The traditions narrate these masters as the *Sambhogakaya* of the Buddha, the *Nirmanakaya* of the Buddha, the *Budhisattva*, and the ordinary person. The first two categories, although slightly different, relate to the teachers whose disciples are already near to the level of complete accumulation. However, the third typology introduces the teachers whose students have been completely liberated from *karmic* obscurations.¹³ It is widely recognized in the Buddhist tradition that beginners in religious studies do not directly approach the aforementioned four spiritual teachers, but only the teachers who are in the form of an ordinary person. Even in the *Budhisattva* group, there are different kinds of masters according to their spiritual level. The foremost figure in this classification is the Shepherd—*Bodhicitta*, who can ensure the enlightenment of all his disciples. These wise masters are expected to pay closer attention to their students' lives rather than to their own personal needs. In fact, if these masters are not deeply concerned with their disciples' needs, they will not be considered as qualified wisdom teachers in the Buddhist tradition.

A further classification found in the Buddhist tradition concerns the wisdom teacher, which is more rooted in the particular vows associated with different kinds of relationships. However, in the *Budhisattva* vow, the three main qualities of spiritual teachers can be categorized as follows: training in discipline, samadhi, and meditation. The first quality points out the significant discipline of the human mind, while the second quality refers to the concentration of mind or the single pointedness of the mind. Finally, meditation is the practicing way to attain wisdom, which can dissipate human delusion. Garry shows the importance of these three higher disciplines by quoting *Nagarjuna*: "Always train yourself in morality concentration, and wisdom. Even the one hundred and fifty-one trainings are truly subsumed under these three."¹⁴

THE STUDENT FROM A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

Just as there are many types of teachers, the appearance of disciples also varies in the Buddhist tradition. The Sanskrit terms used to refer to Buddhist students are *shaiksa*, *shishya*, *vaineya*, and *bhajana*.¹⁵ All these words denote someone who dedicates himself to a spiritual teacher in order to attain the three advanced objectives of enlightenment: self-discipline, deep concentration, and insightful awareness of reality.

12 Yuthok, "The Excellent Method of Cultivating Guru Devotion," 36.

13 Kongtrul, *The Teacher-Student Relationship*, 38.

14 *Ibid.*, 42.

15 Berzin, *Wise Teacher, Wise*, 31.

Disciples learn Lord Buddha's attainments and sayings, recorded later as religious texts, under certain teachers by following them in action and speech. The Tibetan word *getrug* is also used to refer to the disciple in the Buddhist tradition, which signifies a child who is trained under a specific religious teacher along the spiritual path.¹⁶ The disciples should have certain qualities such as faith, conduct, calmness, self-control, tranquility, intelligence, desire to gain knowledge, and respect for teachers.¹⁷ Further qualifications of spiritual students vary according to the level of religious vows in the Buddhist tradition. There are three universal vows in the Buddhist tradition: *pratimoksha*, *bodhisattva*, and *tantra*.¹⁸

In order to accomplish the *pratimoksha* vow, students should possess devotion, patience, the ability to follow the vow, and the ability to learn the sacred texts by heart. It also sets forth certain practices that one should avoid in the period of the *pratimoksha* vow, such as sexual intercourse, theft, murder, and false claims about spiritual achievement. Apart from this, in the *bodhisattva* vow, the student should also possess certain qualities such as faith, compassion, and complete commitment to the extensive *bodhisattva* path. The students should have strong belief in all kinds of sacred texts, and also need faith in the actions of the wisdom teacher. The other characteristics of the *bodhisattva* vow that make the bond between master and disciple solid are nonsectarian, discriminating, and eagerness.¹⁹ The term "nonsectarian" refers to the ability of a student to adopt all schools of Buddhism without being critical, while "discriminating" and "eagerness" refer respectively to the intellectual power of students in choosing the correct path of liberation and the keenness in studying *bodhisattva* vows.

In the *vajrayana* vow, apart from all the conditions of the first two vows, students must have blind devotion to the wisdom teacher. As H.E. Kalu Rinpoche states: "It is true that praying to the Buddha and bodhisattvas and taking refuge in them is an effective way to attain enlightenment, but it is more gradual than the *vajrayana* way of establishing a working relationship with a *lama*. The *vajrayana* contains teachings that can take one to the experience of complete enlightenment in this lifetime. The *lama* is the one who bestows those teachings. Therefore, the *lama* is so crucial in tantric practice, and *mahamudra* teachings, which are part of tantric practice, place such emphasis on the student's relationship with the *lama*."²⁰ Finally, the foremost responsibility of students in the Buddhist tradition is to find a good qualified teacher before entering into a master-disciple relationship with him. One should examine the teacher by following the virtues that are mentioned in the tradition. Although it is difficult to find a real spiritual master

16 Ibid., 33.

17 Mehrdad Massoudi, "On the Qualities of a Teacher and a Student: An Eastern perspective based on Buddhism, Vedanta and Sufism." *Intercultural Education* 13, no. 2 (2010): 137–155, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675980220128979>.

18 Pema Wangyi Gyalpo, *Perfect Conduct Ascertaining the Three Vows*, trans. Gyurme Samdrub and Sangye Khandro (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 2.

19 Kongtrul, *The Teacher–Student Relationship*, 57.

20 Kalu Rinpoche, *The Gem Ornament of Manifold Orals Instructions* (Tibet: KDK Publisher, 1986), 87.

with all the internal qualities, one should take someone who has committed minor faults and has more noble qualities.²¹

THE MASTER-DISCIPLE RELATIONSHIP IN BUDDHISM

In order to get rid of the worldly desires and attain complete *moksha*, it is necessary to have a religious master in Buddhism. Only by associating with a learned wise master can one attain the freedom that brings them back to utmost happiness.²² It is clear from the above two sections that the relationship between master and disciple is highly sophisticated in the Buddhist tradition. As Suzuki states: “The purpose of studying Buddhism is not to study Buddhism, but to study ourselves. It is impossible to study ourselves without some teaching. You need a teacher so that you can become independent.”²³ Today, one of the main reasons for education is to secure a high profession rather than creating a well-rounded human being. Modern education and its pedagogy fulfill only the material needs of the students and completely or partially ignore their spiritual empowerment. In this paper, after elaborating on the Buddhist perspective on master and disciple, it further illustrates that the Buddhist pedagogy mainly focuses on the internal development of the religious student, through the cultivation of wisdom and meditation. It is also notable that the disciples cannot attain the real essence of complete enlightenment unless they follow a spiritual mediator. The tradition itself shows that this relationship is sacred by providing several *sutras* and *tantras* of Lord Buddha. The Buddha himself disclosed that in a later period, he shall appear in the form of a wisdom teacher and disciples should respect their teachers as they respect the Lord Buddha.²⁴ The degree of this relationship also varies according to the three major schools in the Buddhist tradition.²⁵ However, the Tibetan school views the wisdom teacher as Lord Buddha, and sometimes even places the spiritual teacher above the Buddha.²⁶ Buddhism also views the teacher as a mentor or someone who can cure the illness of the student’s life and take them to complete enlightenment. Similarly, the bond between teacher and student changes according to the spiritual level of the student, as well as to the three vows mentioned in the Buddhist tradition.

THE TEACHER FROM AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

Islam views knowledge as the fundamental thing that differentiates human beings from all other creatures. The Qur’ān and the *hadith* frequently praise knowledge along with its

21 Kongtrul, *The Teacher-Student Relationship*, 54.

22 Annabella Pitkin, “Dazzling Displays and Hidden Departures: Bodhisattva Pedagogy as Performance in the Biographies of Two Twentieth Century Tibetan Buddhist Masters.” *Religions* 8, no. 9 (2017): 173–195, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319495924>.

23 Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2011), 85.

24 Berzin, *Wise Teacher, Wise*, 133.

25 Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Vajrayana Buddhism.

26 Klinger, “The Tibetan Guru Refuge: A Historical Perspective,” 13.

people and those who seek it. They encourage the reader to continue their studies and undertake a quest for learning by emphasizing the degree of bliss that is offered to educated people in paradise. The Holy Qur'an says:²⁷ "If you know not, then ask those who have got knowledge of the Book" (16:43). Islam also views knowledge as a bridge that helps its followers to attain utmost happiness. The Prophet states that "whoever follows a path to seek knowledge, God will make easy for him a path to paradise." However, Islam gives more importance to religious studies rather than all other scientific knowledge. As narrated by 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, the Prophet said "the best amongst you is the one who learns the Quran and teaches it."²⁸ Although knowledge plays a vital role in Muslim belief, the teacher is a central figure who views not only the transmutation of knowledge but also the development of students' spiritual, personal, and intellectual life.

The Arabic words that are used to refer to the teacher are *mu'allim*, *murshid*, *shaikh*, *ustādh*, and *mudarrib*. Some of these terms go beyond the common meaning of "teacher" and refer to as a guide or even an adviser. The teacher is also viewed as a physician who can cure the illness of the mind and lead the student to the straight path. Abu Zayd indicates the importance of having a teacher by stating that "whoever becomes involved in seeking knowledge without a *Shaikh* will emerge without knowledge, because knowledge is a profession, and every profession has its experts. Therefore, it is necessary to have a proficient teacher in order to learn."²⁹ In *The Revival of Religious Sciences*, Imām Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī illustrates two types of teachers. The first one possesses knowledge but does not act according to it, while the other acquires knowledge, acts upon it, and teaches it to others. According to al-Ghazālī's view, the first teacher is like a needle that remains naked but sews clothing for others, while the second teacher has been conceptualized as a sun which illuminates itself and gives light to others.³⁰ From an Islamic perspective, the teacher should have certain qualities such as piety, kindness, and sympathy towards the students. They are required to follow the methods of the prophets in their teaching, and deal with each disciple according to their intellectual capacity. Moreover, it is unexpected from masters to belittle the value of any knowledge in front of students.³¹ Masters should treat their disciples like their own children, and try to maintain a healthy, honest, and personal relationship with them. In the early period, scholars had a good relationship with their disciples that led them to take care of students' personal issues, in order to support their studies. Students from all backgrounds enjoyed good quality education without any restriction, in addition to being free and open to all.³²

27 Taqi-ud-Dīn al-Hilālī and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *The Noble Qur'an* (Madinah: King Fahad Press, 1916), 366.

28 Muhammad bin Ḥassan al-Ājurī and Khālid bin 'Usmān al-Sabth, eds, *Mukhtaṣarakh-lāqḥamalāt al-Qur'an* (Cairo: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 2017), 22.

29 Aboo Bakr Zaid, *The Etiquette of Seeking Knowledge*, trans. Abdullah Ash-Shuweikh (Selangor: Al-Hidayah, 2000), 41.

30 Al-Ghazālī, *Revival of Religious Learning*, trans. Fazl-ul-Karim (Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2007), 2:32.

31 Al-Ghazālī, *Revival of Religious Learning*, 32.

32 Fella Lahmar, "Discourses in Islamic educational Theory in the Light of Texts and Contexts," Dis-

In *Ādāb al-mu'allim*, Ibn Saḥnūn offers a comprehensive advice to elementary teachers by emphasizing that modesty, patience, and a passion for working with children are indispensable qualities for teachers.³³ He further states that the teachers should interact with students in a psychological manner while understanding the abilities and limitations of each student. They should provide proper guidelines and counseling to students at the right time and in an appropriate manner.³⁴ The teacher's intention is also important. It should be pure and clean from all kinds of material desires. They should not consider teaching as a profession that brings materialistic pleasures of this world. Classical scholars seriously discussed the issue of teaching religious studies in exchange for payment. Although the debate on this issue consists only of religious studies, Imām al-Ghazālī warns that any teacher whose intention is purely material desires will ruin himself and the life of his students whom he teaches. In addition, teachers should not withhold any knowledge or advice from students or persuade them to undertake evil or sinful activities. Rather, they need to inspire the students by appreciating and rewarding their academic and non-academic works and encouraging them to work hard to achieve further success. Nevertheless, the most important thing that Islam considers while defining the true spiritual teacher is whether he or she applies what they teach. The Prophet said that the most severely punished person on the Day of Judgment would be the learned (who does not act according to what he has learned) whom God has not blessed on account of his knowledge.

Nevertheless, in early Islamic history, mosques were the main educational centers where teachers would give lectures to small study circles of both boys and girls. These study circles were known as *ḥalaqās* where a variety of subjects were taught, including religious and non-religious sciences.³⁵ In the tenth century *hijrī*, during the *Fāṭimid* period, the increasing demand for education opened a new door in Muslim history, rather than confining teaching to the mosques. *Madrasas* and *maktabs* became widespread in all Muslim countries, particularly in South Asian countries. In the fourteenth-century Delhi Sultanate, there were more than 1,000 *madrasas* and *maktabs* in Delhi itself. Teaching in these institutions was considered as a noble and virtuous act, and all allowances of these teachers were paid by the ruling elites.³⁶

THE STUDENT FROM AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

To establish a clear picture about the master–disciple relationship in Islam, it is necessary to check the incident that occurred between the Prophet Muhammad and angel

course: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, September 14, 2011, 479–495, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2011.601548>.

33 Sebastian Günther, “Your Educational Achievements Shall Not Stop Your Efforts to Seek Beyond: Principles of Teaching and Learning in Classical Arabic Writings,” in *Philosophies of Islamic Education, Historical Perspectives and Emerging Discourse*, ed. Nadeem A. Memon and Mujadad Zaman (New York: Routledge, 2016), 76.

34 Zulqarnain, “An Investigation of Teacher–Student Relationship in Islamic History of Education,” 16.

35 Lahmar, “Discourses in Islamic Educational Theory in the Light of Texts and Contexts,” 5.

36 Zaheer Husain Jafri, “Education and Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval India,” *Intellectual Discourse* 20, no.1 (2012): 79–102, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277225365>.

Gabriel during one of their public encounters. The *hadīth* that ‘Umar bin Khaṭṭāb narrated clearly illustrates how students should behave in front of a teacher. They provide awareness about the issue and clearly explain some of the qualities and rules of etiquette that disciples should maintain in the learning process. Muslim scholars noted much of the etiquette disclosed in this particular *hadīth*, which considered complete obedience and respect towards the teacher as one of the basic qualities of a good student. Imām al-Zarnūjī listed some vices that religious students should avoid in their daily life. In his famous book *Ta’līm al-Muta’līm*, he states that students need to keep themselves away from greediness, oversleep, laziness, and wasting time by talking about unproductive things.³⁷ He sets forth certain conditions that every student should follow in his or her academic career. In addition, he emphasizes the importance of companionship with scholars, concentrating more on worship, and holding the prophetic path in every single deed. However, showing immense respect towards teachers helps the student in many ways rather than merely gaining knowledge. It is viewed that the respectful character of a student will also allow him to receive blessings from his teacher. The student should keep himself away from committing sins and maintain the purity of heart that will make him fit for the reception of knowledge. This is because Islam views knowledge as a divine light which offenders cannot attain. Here, in this regard, the narration of Imām al-Shāfi‘ī is widely celebrated in the Muslim tradition. When the Imām complained to his teacher Wakī‘ about his poor memory, he replied to him by advising that knowledge is the gift of God and God will not award it to those who do not maintain the purity of the heart.

In his celebrated work *Ayyuha’l-Walad*, Imām al-Ghazālī described the fundamental etiquettes that students ought to adopt if they seek religious knowledge. First, he states that what a student should admire before entering the learning process is cleanliness, both in terms of physical and spiritual appearance.³⁸ Students must get rid of every material desire and submit themselves wholeheartedly to the knowledge. They should maintain strong patience in the study period and the need to take every challenge in a positive way.

Furthermore, Imām al-Ghazālī illustrates the incident that occurred between Mūsa and al-Khiḍr to describe the importance of being humble towards teachers and not arguing with them. Moreover, students must have a good and positive relationship with their teachers by asking questions and accompanying them continuously to take knowledge from their mouth.³⁹ They need to honor their masters, concentrate on their talks, and not interrupt them while they are giving lectures. Talking over the teachers is disparaged in the tradition, while some classical scholars advise pupils to keep silent in the presence of their teachers.⁴⁰ The student should also have trust and confidence in their teachers. Moreover, they need to consider the teachers’ opinions in a very serious manner and give special place to them. Focusing on a single subject will also help the students in producing good results rather than doing many things together in an incomplete manner. They have to

37 Al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’līm Ṭarīq al-Ta’līm* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1981), 37.

38 Al-Ghazālī, *Ayyuha’l-Walad* (Beirut: Dār Bashāir al-Islāmiyya, 1983), 47.

39 Zaid, *The Etiquette of Seeking Knowledge*, 40.

40 Zulqarnain, “An Investigation of Teacher–Student Relationship in Islamic History of Education,” 18.

memorize the books and materials that they study in the learning process. It is said that Imām al-Shāfi‘ī studied *Al-Muwaffā* of the prominent Muslim jurist Imām al-Mālik and memorized it within a span of nine days. The students also need to take notes from lectures and reading materials. They should not feel frustrated or become impatient if the period of studying takes long. Sometimes they even have to travel for a long period and stay far away from their home. According to Imām Shāfi‘ī, a student cannot attain proper knowledge or enlightenment without having six essential qualities which he describes in a poem: “intelligence, burning desire for knowledge, diligence, maturity, companionship with teachers and finally sustained perseverance.”⁴¹

Islam strongly encourages the acquisition of knowledge. A myriad of prophetic traditions allude to acquiring knowledge even if it demands hardships such as going to China. According to al-Ghazālī, a student can be anyone who attends any institution or one who approaches a teacher to attain knowledge. Imām al-Ghazālī himself did not mention any obstacles or limitations in the learning process, but rather he mentioned that a student can be of any age and from any place, who picks up knowledge from anywhere and anybody, in any form, at any cost to purify his soul and follow the path of the righteous. However, Islam only appreciates such knowledge that will help to understand the true God and bring humans close to him. The classical *madrasa* system was mainly focused on religious and linguistic studies where the Arabic language was taught on the basis that it would help students to understand the scriptures of Islam.⁴² It also appreciates certain knowledge that will help human beings obtain their daily needs. Similarly, other sciences such as philosophy, chemistry, and mathematics that exceeded religious justification were considered as dangerous.⁴³ However, this does not mean that Islam only promotes religious studies and completely demotes other kinds of knowledge. Muslim traditions throughout history stand against this argument and affirm many fields of science to which Muslim scholars have contributed. Finally, sincerity and true intention are also important concepts in Islamic pedagogy which many Qur’ānic verses and prophetic statements emphasize.

THE MASTER–DISCIPLE RELATIONSHIP IN ISLAM

Islam places great emphasis on the relationship between master and disciple. Since knowledge plays a vital role in the Islamic tradition, both teacher and student are central figures in the preservation and transmission of knowledge. Islam advises the students to maintain a personal and spiritual relationship with their teacher whether he or she teaches the religious sciences or not. The tradition believes that negligence in this relationship will affect students’ life and lead them towards unprofitable knowledge. Classical Muslim pedagogy highly values the oral transmission of knowledge where the teacher is viewed

41 Ḥamza ibn Fāyih al-Faṭḥī, “Sudāsiyat al-‘ilm al-Shāfi‘iyya,” *Islamway*, January 25, 2019, accessed April 9, 2019, <https://ar.islamway.net/article/77425/>.

42 Aziz Talbani, “Pedagogy, Power, and Discourse: Transformation of Islamic Education.” *Comparative Education Review* 40, no. 1 (1996), 66–82, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1188968>.

43 Talbani, “Pedagogy, Power and Discourse,” 69.

as an active transmitter of knowledge and the student as a passive receiver.⁴⁴ The *Kūfan* jurist and theologian Abū Ḥanīfa (d. AD 150/767) highly promotes the pattern of question and answer in learning, and also encourages students to use creative intellect and reasoning, as expressed in his book *Kitāb al-‘ālim wa’l-muta‘allim*.⁴⁵ This book was the first of its kind in Islamic pedagogy, which was followed by many classical works including *Iḥṣā‘ al-‘Ulūm* and *Ādāb al-Mu‘allim*. In *Kitāb al-‘Ālim wa al-Ghulām*, the Isma‘īli scholar Ja‘far ibn Maṣṣūr al-Yaman (d. AD 218/883) posits that disciples need to put into practice whatever they learn from their teachers. In order to attain true spiritual knowledge, he sets forth certain conditions such as proper behavior and following the path of those who are spiritually receptive. However, Islam assumes that the bond between teacher and student should be built on truthfulness, obedience, respect, and other qualities mentioned in the tradition. Religion does not view the teacher merely as a transmitter of knowledge; rather, the relationship has been portrayed as a chain that might pass knowledge along with blessings and wisdom. In addition to this, Islam posits that the ultimate goal of education is to build a strong moral foundation that may empower the disciples both in this world and the hereafter.⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

This paper illustrates that the relationship between master and disciple is a prime notion within both Buddhism and Islam. Despite the geographical differences, both faith traditions share similar etiquettes and rulings concerning the teaching and learning. The research shows that their similarities are more than their diverging features. The Buddhist tradition views this relationship as a foundational belief that cannot be ignored by a spiritual student. In contrast, it seems that Islamic classical tradition views this relationship as a path where students can obtain blessings from a spiritual teacher, other than seeing it as a means to merely acquire knowledge. These oriental religions equally set forth certain etiquettes for both master and disciple, such as trust, respect, kindness, good conduct, and humility. Moreover, etiquette and respect towards masters play a vital role in the acquisition of religious knowledge in both religions.

In Buddhism, most of the literature studies that deal with the master–disciple relationship are contemporary works and consist only of the positive side of the topic. Moreover, many cases have been reported recently by different national and international agencies regarding the abuse of the master–disciple relationship within Buddhist monasteries.⁴⁷ In the Islamic tradition, classical scholars approached the issue of Islamic pedagogy in a particularly scripture-focused fashion. They relied mainly on Qur’ān and

44 Talbani, “Pedagogy, Power and Discourse,” 70.

45 Günther, “Principles of Teaching and Learning in Classical Arabic Writings,” 73.

46 Hamdun I. Sulayman, “Values-Based Curriculum Model: A Practical Application of Integrated ‘Maqasid Al-Sharia’ for Wholeness Development of Mankind,” *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 123, no. 1 (2014): 477–484, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042814014852>.

47 Joe Shute, “Why Tibetan Buddhism is facing up to its own abuse scandal,” *The Telegraph*, September 9, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/09/09/tibetan-buddhism-facing-abuse-scandal/>.

Sunna; subsequently, they put forth numerous conditions and points of etiquette that a religious student and teacher should acquire in the process of learning. Classical scholars have extensively written on this subject area of Muslim pedagogy (for a detailed description, see Imām al-Zarnūjī’s work *Ta līm al-Muta‘allim Ṭarīq al-Ta‘allum*). These scholars had strong motivations for engaging in the genre of Islamic scholarship, namely “learning etiquette.” Discussing the relevance of his work, Imām Zarnūjī added, “I observed in our days many students of learning striving to attain knowledge but failing to do so and are thus barred from its utility and fruition. This is because they have missed the proper method of learning and have abandoned its conditions. Anyone who misses this way goes astray, and therefore, does not reach its objective, however modest or glorious.”⁴⁸

Furthermore, Muslim scholars have even emphasized the importance of integrated curriculum that covers both religious sciences and secular disciplines.⁴⁹ Muslim polymaths al-Farābī and al-Ghazālī adopted this integrated approach towards education, similar to what can be observed from a much later Islamic history of *Mughal* India. The great ruler Akbar was quoted to have said that “no one should be allowed to neglect those things which the present times required.”⁵⁰ In addition, there are also many contemporary studies in the areas of education and teaching pedagogy. Most of them focus on the psychological methods within the modern education system, and compare this with conventional religious teaching pedagogy in religious traditions. Although similarities can be found in both religions with respect to the master–disciple relationship, the availability of the literature that uses comparative methodology is inadequate. In addition to this, students can contribute to the discussion of the master–disciple relationship by undertaking an analytical study of classical sources. Finally, approaching this relationship from a historical perspective using a comparative methodology will greatly contribute to future studies.

48 Al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta līm al-Muta llim Ṭarīq al-Ta llum*, 57.

49 Günther, “Principles of Teaching and Learning in Classical Arabic Writings,” 84.

50 Jafri, “Education and Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval India,” 90.

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